



Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

The South East Local Learning & Employment Network was established in 2001 as part of the Victorian Government's strategy to increase Year 12 retention and provide education and training pathways for young people aged 15 to 19. The Network is also a Commonwealth funded Local Community Partnership, providing school to work and further study advice and support to young people and staff in the 56 Secondary Colleges in our region.

The South East LLEN represents network members from the local government areas of the City of Greater Dandenong, the City of Casey & Cardinia Shire in the South East of Melbourne, Victoria. Our membership of some 250 organisations and agencies includes all secondary schools (State, Catholic & Independent), all Group Training Companies operating in the area, Chisholm TAFE, the three local Government's and all organizations and agencies in the South East that work to support young people. We also have 66 employer members and a broader employer support network of several hundred businesses. There are approximately 30,000 young people in this region between the ages of 15 and 19 whom we work to support and represent and for many of whom the changes in the youth allowance criteria will impact.

The submission is made on the basis of consultation with those members and with the Board of Directors of the South East LLEN.

In the South East of Melbourne, as across Australia, there is a large cohort of young people who made reasonable and measured further study pathways decisions at the end of last year working wholly within the 'rules' as they were then. This cohort – should the new workforce participation rules for Youth Allowance be introduced in 2010 – will be penalized for making those reasonable and measured pathways decisions.

SE LLEN

Level 1, 54 McCrae St
PO Box 7050
DANDENONG VIC 3175

Ph: 03 9794 6921
Fax: 03 9793 3258

ABN: 65 663 312 659

www.sellen.org.au
admin@sellen.org.au

We are concerned about the impact of these changes on young people in the South East of Melbourne, where overall university participation levels barely reach 35%. We are also, and particularly, concerned about the impact on young people in rural and regional areas of Victoria for whom employment and further training arrangements have always been challenging and on whom the impact of this change in criteria may fall more heavily than their urban 'cousins'.

Our work in this area has been informed by the report of the Victorian Parliamentary Committee for Education and Training 'Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education' and by our work directly with young people in education. In addition many of our fellow LLENs are currently involved in a longitudinal study of university deferrers to discover what proportion takes up their deferred study and also to understand the barriers for those who do not. The study tracks regional deferrers from the 2006 Year 12 cohort and is about to be publically released.

Key findings from the University Deferment Study referred to above include:

- A trend of increasing regional disadvantage is evident in the pattern of rising rates of deferral amongst regional school completers
- Approximately three in 10 (30.1%) do not take up a place at university after one year
- Deferrers from regional areas were less likely to take up a university place than others
- Financial barriers remained prominent among the reasons given by young people for having not taken up a place in education or training
- Students working long hours while at university were more likely to have dropped out of their course.

The Victorian Parliamentary Committee for Education and Training Inquiry found similar issues, particularly linking the impact of geographical differences and higher education participation and saying –

‘Time and again, the Committee heard about the difficulties faced by young school leaving rural and regional areas who are contemplating leaving home to study’

We are concerned that some of the changes to Youth Allowance proposed by the Commonwealth will add significantly to those difficulties.

We understand – and absolutely support – the policy drivers behind the adoption of the new criteria for Youth Allowance put forward in this year’s Commonwealth budget, which will over time allow for more young people from lower socio economic backgrounds to access tertiary education. These changes will benefit many of the young people in Melbourne’s South East where tertiary participation rates remain quite low. However, we would like to emphasize three key issues that we believe have not been adequately addressed:

- 1 For many rural and regional students, the costs of living away from home will remain prohibitive. These costs are the primary reason for deferring university as identified by participants in the deferral study. Rural and regional students defer their university placement at more than double the rate of their metropolitan counterparts and reject their university offer at nearly double the rate of metropolitan students.

Even if students opt to work 30 hours a week for 18 months, the lack availability of work in rural and regional areas is a key issue. In addition, some courses only allow a single year of deferment. Student who are required to work excessive hours to meet their costs of living have reported a negative impact on their wellbeing and on their academic achievement and there is an increased risk of disengagement.

Additional levels of accommodation support, particularly in on-campus accommodation, would assist in addressing this issue. Consideration should also be given to priority for regional and rural students in on-campus accommodation.

Youth Allowance payments should better reflect the real student costs of living.

- 2 There is an issue of lack of aspiration amongst students and families. Lower (than metropolitan) completion rates and academic achievement levels attest to this, along with feedback from our schools and from young people themselves.

An increased level of university/school partnerships would assist in addressing this, with a particular focus on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Consideration of particular strategies to address aspiration issues amongst Indigenous students, and language skills and access issues amongst recently arrived migrant and refugee students are particularly required.

- 3 The introduction of the new Youth Allowance rules includes the failure to grandfather the previous earning rule for the one year. This is quite unfair as many students who have deferred in good faith will now be unable to access the Youth Allowance through their earnings by the change to the rules in the middle of this year.

Consideration should be given to delaying the introduction of this new rule to 2011.

Further recommendations proposed for the Inquiry to consider include the following –

- redefining the criteria for independence as it related to the Independent Youth Allowance
- adjustment to Parental Income Thresholds to take in to consideration the costs associated with supporting a child living a significant distance away from home in order to study as currently occurs for Apprentices and Trainees.

Additionally South East LLEN recommends that this Senate Inquiry

- ensures that the proposed changes to the Independent Youth Allowance be reframed to give due consideration to geographical distances, working from the wealth of data in the Victorian Parliament report in the reframing of the youth allowance provisions

Paul Di-Masi
South East LLEN CEO

6th August 2009